

Suspected breeding of Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* in Mauritania

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Suite à la restauration du régime d'inondations saisonnières, effectuée dans le cadre des aménagements pour le Parc National du Diawling, des observations d'immatures du Flamant nain *Phoeniconaias minor* dans le bas-delta du fleuve Sénégal suggèrent que l'espèce a repris sa nidification, qui n'avait plus été confirmée depuis 1965.

On 3 October 1998 we observed two very dark brown immature flamingos at Chott Boul, a lagoon in the Sénégal River Delta, in Mauritania¹. They appeared smaller and browner than the immature Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber* that commonly occur in the area. However, as they flew off quickly and there were no other flamingos present for direct comparison, we could not be certain of our tentative identification of Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*.

On 13 September 1999 we were more fortunate. In the late afternoon, a group of 10 adult Lesser Flamingo was present in the west part of the lagoon, with nine immature flamingos, six of which were dark brown with wholly black bills, and three were larger, more greyish and possessed the typical bicoloured (bluish-grey and black) bill of immature Greater Flamingo (a characteristic not depicted in Cramp & Simmons² or Brown *et al*³). The shape of the bill, especially the lower mandible (much more angular in Lesser Flamingo) was clearly observed and compared with the Greater Flamingos present. The birds were photographed (see Figs. 1 & 2). A group of c1,700

adult Lesser Flamingo was observed circling overhead and c50 more were settled in the east part of the lagoon. On 29 October 1999, at the same site, three adult and five juvenile Lesser Flamingo, with more greyish plumage, were present.

Discussion

The only previous record of successful breeding by Lesser Flamingo in West Africa dates from 1965⁴ at a site c20 km north of Chott Boul lagoon, in the Aftout es Saheli. A failed breeding attempt was noted in the same area in 1988, when the area was flooded⁵. Following restoration of the flood regime in the Mauritanian lower delta, around Diawling National Park³, important concentrations of Lesser Flamingo (up to 8,000) have been observed year-round⁶. In particular, 1998 and 1999 were especially favourable years, because large quantities of fresh water from the Sénégal River reached the hypersaline Chott Boul lagoon, and even flooded the southern Aftout es Saheli basin, restoring productivity to these areas, as exemplified by the high concentrations of waterfowl often present (maximum numbers on the 200 ha



Figure 1. Adult Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor*, Chott Boul, Sénégal Delta, Mauritania, September 1999 (Olivier Hamerlynck)



Figure 2. Adult and immature Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor* and (on left) three immature Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber*, Chott Boul, Sénégal Delta, Mauritania, September 1999 (Olivier Hamerlynck)

lagoon included 200 Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*, 1,000 White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, 2,300 Greater Flamingo, 5,600 Eurasian Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* and 800 Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*).

Other known breeding areas of Lesser Flamingo (East African Rift Lakes and Namibia) are very distant, and it appears highly possible that the immatures observed at Chott Boul were bred in the immediate vicinity, probably in July–August. Moreover, the observation of the presumed same juveniles in late October suggests they are sedentary. Aerial surveys of the area, which is almost wholly inaccessible, planned for the 2000 breeding season, may confirm breeding. More extensive flooding of the southern Aftout would probably be highly beneficial to many bird species, and permit the re-establishment of the former breeding colonies of Greater Flamingo, White Pelican and Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*.

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